

Famous Paintings

*Selected from the World's Great Galleries and Reproduced in Color
with Introduction and Commentary by Gilbert Keith Chesterton*

“The statement that the work of the Old Masters can be effective for popular education is not such a platitude as it will at first appear. It is both more disputable and more true than it seems. For the truth is that the great art of the past can be used for this purpose where a great many other methods now generally adopted are quite clumsy and futile.

...
We talk somewhat lightly about “schools” of art. Whether or no the art of Raphael be better as an art it is certainly better as a school. Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Post-post-impressionism and the rest, are developments which may be credited or criticised according to every man’s aesthetic philosophy. It may be the end of art, in the sense of the object of art. It may be the end of art in the sense of the abolition of art. But anyhow, it is not the beginning of art; it is not the initiation, the origin, the introductory motive. What art is to begin with, what it obviously is, what is the reason that anyone ever made it, that people can learn to-day from the Old Masters. And they can learn it from nobody else.

A hundred cases could be taken; but take the case of a common phrase; a common sneer with the art critics. I mean the phrase “a picture that tells a story.” A picture by Leonardo da Vinci tells a story. A picture by Paul Veronese tells a story. A picture by Titian or Tintoretto tells a story. The first and most important question is, what story? Most medieval and Renaissance pictures tell *the* story; the story on which all our European civilisation is founded, and is founded as finally if the thing is a fairy tale or if the thing is a truth. The objection to pictures which “tell a story” only began in our time, for the very simple reason that the story was a dull story. I will not discuss here whether the great story of God made Man has been destroyed. I will confine myself to saying that it has certainly not been replaced.

I should therefore urge the re-publication of old and good pictures as a real part of that grossly neglected thing - public education. Our historians lie much more than our journalists; our fashionable conceptions of the past change with every fashion; and like most fashions, are fantastic and hideous. But the old colours and the old canvases do not lie; they were really achieved in the ages which we parody or pervert; and the squareness of their drawing, the brightness of their colours, the substantial sincerity of their subject, will still tell us something of the fathers we have forgotten. I do not go so far as to say we have relapsed into barbarism. But I do say that we can just now learn best from picture writing.”

G. K. Chesterton

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